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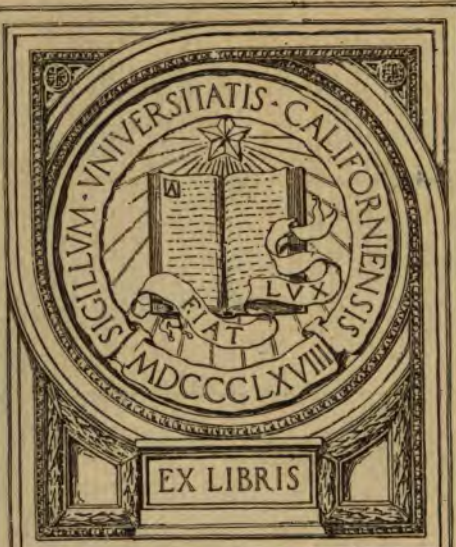

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The World Conflict

By

William Augustus Benjamin

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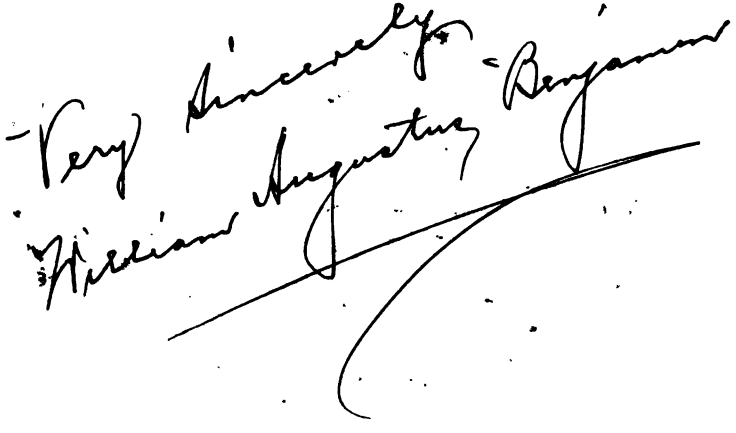

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The World Conflict

A PROPHETIC VISION

By

William Augustus Benjamin

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

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To

Gesena W. Koch

Santa Barbara, Cal.

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The World Conflict

Canto 1. The Barge of Old Charon

'Twas at the twilight hour. I had retired
Unto my chamber, there to rest, to sleep
Mayhap, but not to dream,—or was't a dream?
Nay, hardly such, for in my mortal state
I surely passed that rough and rugged way
Unguided, still by spirit seeming driven,
Until, with bleeding feet and aching limbs,
I came upon a high and rocky ledge
That overhung a high, still-moving stream,
With shadow-mist o'erspread.

There to the north where seemed the end of some
Dark valley, two great mountains formed a wall
That marked the bound'ry of that awesome place.
Long flaming rays of purple-crimson shone
In fan-like streams of deeply shaded light
From up behind those gloomy mountain peaks,
And flung their penciled lines of sombre fire
Far o'er the sluggish tide.

The quiet waters laved a shadowy shore,
Low murmuring in mournful monotone;
And in the murkiness of that dense shade,
Electric tension gripped my inmost soul
As in a vise of steel. Close riveted
It held me fast upon that eminence
Of barren rock—a prisoner in chains.
A sense of silent but appalling grief
Closed 'round my heart, like some great sinner's prayer,
That sends its strong appeal into the void
Unto an unknown God.

How had I found my way unto that strange,
Lone vale of brooding silences, and why?
And whither flowed that wide-spread, quiet stream,

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So dimly outlined 'neath the flick'ring light,
Which seemed to fall from nowhere,—everywhere,—
And shrouding all as in a purple flame,
Gave rise to inward fear, portending some
Great, frightful cataclysm.

And then, as for a space the flame rolled on,
And vision cleared for me apace, I saw,
Upon the farther shore, dim figures move
Toward the river's edge, where they long stood,
And seemed to gaze in some weird, wistful sense,
Far out across the waters calm and wide;
And watching thus, I realized that this
Was Lethe—River of Forgetfulness;
That those upon the other shore were shades
Of warriors great, of years now dead and gone,
Who, in their time, had overturned the world
For lust of conquering.
And as I, too, looked o'er the waters, lo,
From out the shadows of that dismal vale,
A cumbrous barge, high-laden, swept the stream,
Propelled by long and gleaming double blades
Of hoary old Charon.

Somewhat surprised by this strange spectacle,
Thus quickly coming into view, I cried:
"Old Ferryman!" Like mystic rippling rills
Of ghoulish, mocking laughter, my voice sped
In challenge o'er the waves. "Old Ferryman!"
He stayed his hand and with arrested oar,
He turned and gazed at me with sad, white face.
"Old Ferryman, and whither goest thou,
And what may be thy cargo?" I enquired.
A moment on the boat's broad prow he stood,
Upright and calm, like silent sculptured bronze,
Almost heroic in th' uncertain light,
And then he answered thus:

"These be the souls of those who bravely died,
"They knew not why. Not for their king, nor for
"Their country's sake; not for a principle
"Apparent, but like sheep to slaughter led."
He paused a moment sadly, then resumed:
" 'T has been a task for Hercules of late,
"They come in myriad throngs, all bleeding, torn

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"By gaping wounds; 'twould make the angels weep
"Could they look down upon it all, and hear
"Their deep, heart-shatt'ring moans."

He sighed and muttered incoherently
Unto himself; then, in a clearer tone:
"By order of th' Almighty One I take
"These hero-souls unto a fairer land
"Than e'er they've known before."

Again he paused and keenly gazed at me.
"Would'st know the secret of their tragic end?
"If so, I'll give thee Damos as thy guide,
"To show these things to thee, but on this one
"Condition: What thine eyes do there behold,
"Thine ears do hear; unto thy soul is there
"Revealed; these thou shalt speak aloud unto
"The nations of the earth."

His query grave so deep the silence marked
I needs must answer him, and so I said:
"Old Ferryman, fain would I know these things
"Of great import, and willingly will I
"As thou hast asked of me."

Whereon, from out the shadows dim, came he
Whom Charon had called Damos. He spake not,
But with a silent gesture led the way.
Up from the rocky, shelf-like ledge we passed,
'Till, skirting canyon's wall, we came once more
Upon the rugged path which led us hence,
Unto the outer world.

My guide and I now paused to look again
Upon that awesome river scene below.
Lethe was but a glist'ning wraith of mist,
And th' barge of old Charon had disappeared
Into the shadows of that distant shore
Beyond the Acheron.

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Canto 2. The Mount of Vision

Ere e'en the morning shafts of light had touched
That highest peak, t'ward which, with arduous toil,
Damos and I had climbed throughout the night,
We reached the crest, and, weary, rested there;
Strange creatures of the night were all about
And oft disturbed the deep surrounding gloom,
But unto these we gave no heed, for, as
The early dawn began to break, we 'roused,
And looked abroad o'er mountains, chain on chain,
E'en o'er th' expansive seas that swept the shores
Of many alien lands.

Quaint villages were clustered in the vales,
Close sheltered by the mountains, cypress clad,
That breathed their fragrant balm unto the world;
Beyond the green rose snowy peaks of white,
Befrosted guardians of the passing years.
The dome above, where countless billions of
Bright, glitt'ring worlds, greater by far than ours,
Gleamed through the indigo of that vast space,
Gave unto us no revelation new
Of ages past and gone; but there, below,
In th' shad'wy vale, our 'customed vision saw,
In dream-like cavalcade, an endless host,
War-clad, in stately movement forging on,
On—on—forever on.

"Dost know these phantom shapes who ride below?"
My guide enquired: "Methinks I know," said I,
"Strangely familiar do their faces seem."
Then Damos, low, in musing monotone
Replied: "So passeth those who in their time
"The world called great. See! Yonder ride the shades
"Of mighty Caesar and of Hannibal;
"There, too, Lysander and Red Alaric,
"There Khosru Third and the great Attila,
"Theoph'lus, Barbarossa, Bohemond,
"Peter the Great, Robespierre, Napoleon,
"Von Moltke and Bismarck;
"And also those from out thine own fair land*
"Amongst these riders thou canst recognize.
"Enthralled with life and great ambition all,

*America.

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"These warriors of a glorious, misty past
"Played many parts,—lived their allotted time,
"Then—passed to Shadowland."

"The gilded pomp and splendor of their times
"Lies buried in the haze of ages past;
"The festive banners that so bravely streamed,
"Today hang shreds and old, unsightly rags;
"Gone, gone indeed the glory of their names;
"Of Caesar, Hannibal, Napoleon;
"The fierce-fought Trojan and the Punic wars,—
"Crusades and Conquests, all of blood-bought power,
"Are passed like painted scenes upon a stage,
"Into oblivion."

"In cruel warfare they did barter life
"For booty and for self-aggrandizement:
"For this—in years to come, their very names
"Effaced will be from off the page of fame,
"Save here and there in children's hist'ry books
"They may in some small measure mark the flight
"Of years." "But they who fought for principle,—
"Who suffered death for some great, noble cause,
"Some mighty purpose to uplift the race,
"Their names shall ever live."

And gazing still into the vale below,
We saw the last of that vast pageant fade
Away, as tho' absorbed within the mists
Of passing night, for dawn e'en then began
To throw its light around that peak on which
Damos and I reclined.

A silence seemed to fall o'er all the earth;
So strong a silence that it burdened me,
And happening to look that moment on
The face of Damos I did see the light
Of Revelation,—the unveiling there
Of some portentious secret, God-revealed.
In almost breathless tensity I sat,
The very beating of my heart seemed stilled,
As slowly, very slowly crept the light
Of dawn adown the mountain sides, into
The valleys far below.

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Then spake he,—Damos, and his voice, tho' clear,
Seemed far away: "Long time Almighty Jove
"Hath waited patiently, year after year,—
"Watched century on century roll by,
"Aweighted down with their vast burdens of
"Accumulated sin, of shame and wrong;
"But now"—and Damos voice rang out o'er hill
And vale like some great clarion call to arms:
"Now He hath tired of waiting and doth put
"In action a stupendous plan; His last
"Great World-Redemption Plan."

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Then Damos turned. "Behold this scene," said he;
And from that dizzy, towering mountain height,
Which from earth's very center seemed to rise,
We gazed abroad o'er mountain, sea and shore
Of many lands, enwrapped in morning light.
Far to the north and west swept level plains,
Broken anon by intervening knolls
Or hills. Fair rivers coursed like sinuous threads
Across rich meads, while 'long the rugged line
Of coast great rocky caves, giant palisades,
Rich coral isles and grottoes added to
The beauty of that European world.
Close at our feet lay France and Italy,
And to the north fair Belgium and "The Isles;"
Beyond the land of Huns and Turks and Poles
The mighty German Empire, Russia and
The great Siberian plains.

All these were lands of industry and thrift,
Which, by the process and the progress of
Great minds had almost reached the pinnacle
Of power,—the plane of Christian attribute
And Brotherhood. Almost,—not quite! For there,
E'en as we gazed upon that beauteous scene,
From out the earth an iron meteor sped
With vibrant, hissing scream—and crash! Behold,
Earth's largest mountain fell, or so it seemed:
So great the cataclysm that around
The world and into the far reaches of
The universe the thunder of it rolled.
Then all known holocausts of war were paled
To insignificance.

The German Empire stirred and roused; the air
Was shattered with the throb of drums, the blare
Of bugles,—champing bits, the flaunting silks,
The burnished helmets' glare,—the call to arms;
Earth trembled under tread of myriad feet,
And o'er fair Belgian lands, with om'nous roar,
Raged the fierce Teuton hordes.

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They scorched the very ground o'er which they passed;
They stumbled on, slaying and being slain,
At length to come abreast of miles on miles
Of stalwart Britons and intrepid French.
With clash of sabre, whirr of shot and shell;
With air a-clangor and a-seethe as hell,
The holocaust swept on.

But through the quivering, quaking din of war,
The everlasting query came—and came—
Insistent came: "Why are they fighting us?"
"Why are we fighting them?"

And to the south and east, o'er Austrian lands;
E'en past Carpathia's rugged mountain heights,—
O'er Russian borderland and on that ground
Made sacred by great Kosciusko's blood,
Ten thousand thousand warriors madly ride;
Ten thousand thousand husbands, fathers, sons,
Our brothers all,—to kill—to kill—to kill
Ten thousand thousand other sons of men,
And leave a million women home to weep
In blank despair. Oh, God of Hosts, we ask,
In anguished soul: *"What for?"*

And God of Pity, Thy protection grant
To those lone women isolated there;
Those tender girls with fathers, brothers, gone
To fields of death. They, desolate, are left
Unto those fiendish ghouls in shapes of men;
Strange products of inhuman savagery,
Their wanton acts are e'en a stench unto
The nostrils of the arch-fiend Lucifer.
But they may not escape their punishment
For such befouling, world-appalling deeds;
Swift retribution doth o'ertake them all.
Their carcasses are offal and upon
The dunghill of the world are roughly thrown,
Where blood-eyed buzzards tear them limb from limb;
Their souls, so infin'tessimal, flit out
And quickly join the other dastard few
Who violate all common decency.
There e'en in deepest hell shall be no place
For such as these. In execration thus
They pass, abhorred, into th' Eternal Night.
'Tis well no mercy's shown.

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Again we looked and everywhere we saw,
As far as eye could reach in normal vis'n,
Long seams which cleft the earth, mile after mile.
The gray-black smoke of battle almost hid
The serpent lines of myriad struggling foes,
Who, in the rough-hewn trenches, fought both night
And day for mastery.

Well pitted they in strength of arms and men,
And endlessly, week in, week out, they fought
And fell,—fought, fought and fell to rise no more.
The crash of guns, the screaming shells, the din
Of cannons' roar; the shouts and blasphemies
Of men,—the shrieks of pain and dying moans,
All mingled with the piteous prayers of those,
Who, near death's portal, sought the passing way
Unto that plane where war and death are not.
Great Spirit, be their guide.

Across the sky from ev'ry compass point,
West, north to east,—east, north to south and back,
Dark shadows flew as fleet-winged falcons dart,—
Mere specks in the cerulean space above;
And watched by many eager eyes, alert,
In ambush safely hidd'n to bring them down,
The Zeppelins, biplanes and monoplanes
Sailed hither, yon, in straight, unerring course,
And on fair hamlets far below, or in
The city's crowded streets and squares, sent their
Projectiles hurtling down with flaming death
Upon the innocent.

And there upon the misty, dawn-swept sea,
Fleet war-boats darted in and out between
The myriads of battle-ships, like bolts
Of iron from some giant cross-bow flung;
While here and there great dreadnaughts ploughed the
deep;
Their sides and decks with polished armor gleamed,
And bristled with the ever-ready guns.

* * * * *

A sharp impact, a flash of blinding light,
A maelstrom rose amidst a thund'rous roar;
Colossal steel Leviathan of war

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Upreared; an instant's agonizing wait
It trembling hung, suspended in mid-air,—
Then in the vortex of the sea, with one
Great shudd'ring, final gasp, forever sank
Beneath the surging waves, and with it took
A thousand sensient, strong, immortal souls.
Death reigned on land and sea in all that vast
Domain; Death—Everywhere!

God of our Fathers, be with those who in
Their day died valiantly, they knew not why;
And on their breasts, instead of Iron Cross,
Or badge of earthly praise, affix Thine own
True Star of Glory bright.

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Canto 4. The Revelation

Still watching from that lofty pinnacle
The gripping scenes forever shift and change
On sea and shore, and in the air above,
We sat, grief-stricken souls, immovable,
So great th' appalling horror of it all.
Then Damos spake and to my soul revealed
The marv'lous purpose of Almighty God,
Who, lab'ring with His people year by year
For their eternal good, had weary grown.
With open mind and heart I heard *The Voice;*
So that, with inner vision clear, wherewith
Before unseeing I had tried to see,—
I did behold those self-same faces which
But short time since had passed on cumbrous barge
Beyond the Acheron.

As in that time when old Charon I saw,
And gave him promise that unto the world
I would reveal all things which came into
My heart and mind,—so now I tell unto
All men those things I had not heretofore
An understanding of, but which unto
My soul good Damos thus interpreted:
"In some few conflicts of the ages past
"Great principles have been the base on which
"Their deadly warfare raged,—but ah, so few!"
"A thousand million precious souls have passed
"For conquest's sake, for greed of gold and power,
"For high position, for this world's estate,
"For all things but the right, and these—these have
"Been wholesale murders, instigated by
"That Nation's Head, who, had the welfare of
"His people ruled his heart, had paved a way
"Of peace and love instead of bloody strife,
"Which brought but death and woe."

"Beneath the social stratum of the earth
"O'er which the idle mighty of our time
"So calmly walk, unheeding *The Great Cry,*
"Gaunt hands of millions stretch beseechingly.
"They plead a part of their inheritance
"By right of life,—by right of weary toil;
"They plead the peace of all the world; they plead

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"The brotherhood of man by right of that
"Most precious blood Christ gave on Calv'ry's hill,
"Long centuries ago."

"As in th' Almighty's plan of that dark age,
"When to the earth He sent His only Son
"For the redemption of a sin-sick world,—
"One Judas did a necessary part
"Enact in that soul-stirring Passion play;
"So in this monstrous drama He doth choose
"A Kaiser, Czar and Kings of many lands;
"And they, aligned in battle's fierce array,
"Do play their parts today."

"This conflict is not waged for conquest's sake,
"For greed or power, nor for th' aggrandizement
"Of any man,—Czar, Kaiser, King; although
"Within the baser thoughts of those who hold
"The reigns of government today this may
"Be uppermost. Nor are those men of power
"The heroes of this mighty drama of
"The world. The heroes are those unknown brave
"Who in the fields are serving; giving life
"For their dear Homeland; facing foe with staunch
"Endeavor; perishing on battle fields,
"Not knowing why, but under stern command
"Of duty going forth to fight and die,
"With all the calm and knightly courage of
"The warriors of old."

"Oh Sons of Battle in this mighty cause,
"And faithful women left behind to mourn
"In silence loss of husband, brother, son,
"Or friend, be not cast down, but lift your heads,
"And let the light of glory won beam in
"Your eyes; for, Spirits of the Brave, and those
"You left at home, hear this most wondrous thing:

"It is God's last resort to bring great peace,
"An everlasting peace to all the world,—
"And triumph, like a golden crown, shall rest
"Upon the brows of those, who, in this cause
"Have brought the Victory."

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Canto 5. The New Regime

The glitt'ring stars again grew pale, as I,
Still seeming on the mountain's height, bestirred
Myself and found that in the night Damos
Had gone. The morning light swept valley, sea
And shore as I looked forth once more o'er all
That European world.

The carnage of The Fearful Day had passed;
A Night of Rest had followed after strife.

Wide fields of grain waved in the gentle breeze;
On ev'ry side the busy mill-wheels clanked
And whirred with most tremendous energy;
A myriad ships sailed o'er the boundless deep
With flags of ev'ry nation flying free,
While airships, unmolested, flew across
The turquoise dome of space like great white doves.
A-teem with life earth had responded to
The call of man *with* Life, with plenty and
With happiness,—and man, from out the shade
Of deepest night, beholds the Radiant Dawn;
The Dawn of Hope and Love.

For on the earth a new Democracy
Doth rise, and kings shall rule no more, nor shall
The head of any nation seek to make
A right by might of conquest, but through love
And by the bonds of Christian Brotherhood
The world shall move and ever be at peace.
The nations' greed for gold, which, in time past
Hath sacrificed all human sympathy
To fill cold, clutching, avaricious maws,
Will pass away, and all the hell-conceived
Inventions for the slaughter of mankind
Shall disappear for aye.

And womankind shall come into her own;
Shall have a part in law and government,—
And broader, clearer justice shall prevail.
These Mothers of the Race shall step into
The Breach—the Empty Places left by those

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Who, in this war-crime havoc, have passed on
To other scenes. These women who, tho' all
The world of men be conquered, still remain
Steadfast, firm Advocates of Peace and Love,
As they have ever been.

The soldier shall become the husbandman,—
Shall own the land, and till the fruitful soil.
Our warships will great merchantmen become,
To carry the substantial benefits
Of all the world's great industries unto
The nations far and wide; so that all men
May plenty have and ne'er again in all
The hist'ry of the race shall hungered be,
But may partake of all the fruits of earth,
In equity bestowed.

The Spirit of a Great Love, broad, serene,
Shall come to all, the true Millennial Dawn;
'Tis thus the Christ himself shall come again.
God's Peace shall reign supreme!

Apotheosis

Far off I see the radiant hills of God,
Enhaloed by a light of silver-blue;
The fairest flowers of all the world grow there;
And on the slopes the gentle shepherd lads
Attend their flocks. Along the peaceful vale
A crystal stream winds in and out;—it is
The Stream of Life and on its shores the fruits
Of all the nations grow.

From out the midst of this most beauteous scene,
On th' Rock of Ages, stands a Marble Shaft,
Up-towering in the blue where all the world
May see. Graven on ev'ry side, North, East,
And South and West, these soul-inspiring words:
To all those martyred hosts who fell, that,
In the wisdom of Almighty God, the world
Have Everlasting Peace.

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